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Interview with Jay Rockefeller by Brien Williams

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Jay Rockefeller
(Interviewer: Brien Williams)

GMOH# 213
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Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with Senator Jay Rockefeller. We are in his Washington office, today is Friday, April 16th, 2010, and I am Brien Williams. I thought the first thing I would ask you is, when you knew that I was going to be asking you some questions about Senator Mitchell, what the first thoughts were that came to your mind in that regard?

Jay Rockefeller: You got to say that all over again. When I first knew that you were going to be asking me about him, what thoughts came into my mind?

BW: Hmm-hmm.

JR: Very efficient, had a really strong, properly placed bias. Really an anger against, when we had caucuses every Tuesday, about people holding what they'd learned inside the room. And there were three senators, whom I would love to name, one of them is still here, who would listen to his "really, please" – and it got more and more desperate because we'd keep reading about everything in the paper the next day – he'd just walk right outside and just say everything that happened. That drove me crazy, it gave me a different sense of the importance of trusting. Because if you're asked by a majority leader to keep a secret, which you shouldn't be asked to have to know that, I mean what's private and what's discussed behind closed doors, you don't have to be instructed at the age of fifty or sixty or forty or whatever to not talk about it outside. And there were some senators that regularly did that, and they were always the same ones. They'd just walk right outside and just (*sound effect*).

BW: How did the caucus operate under George Mitchell's predecessor, Robert Byrd, was it a different place?

JR: Yes, I actually can't remember that well, because I've been here a while, I don't know how long I've been here, but I don't remember, honestly. Now, whether my memory's deciding it doesn't *want* to remember, or whether I just don't remember, I just don't remember. You can guess, I mean it would have been more formal, although George Mitchell's a formal person, he's a formal person, he was brought up that way I think. And they're both very disciplined, very rational. My guess is that Byrd probably encouraged much less discussion than George Mitchell did, he was good at that.

BW: Would there be repercussions under Robert Byrd if someone went out and leaked things, or was that happening under his watch too?

JR: I suspect it was, I mean certain senators are always certain senators, and Byrd probably fumed. But there really isn't any way that you can hurt a senator when it comes down to it, you can't take his committee position away from him because that's all done by seniority.

BW: For the record and for people that are unfamiliar with ---

JR: It's off the record.

BW: Okay. What was the function of the caucus really, during Mitchell's time?

JR: I don't think it's ever changed, I think the mechanism of doing it changes from personality to personality, Daschle was a little different than Reid, than Mitchell and Byrd, et cetera. But the function is that both parties do it, and the -- actually, was this under Mitchell? When did Mitchell come in to be majority leader?

BW: Eighty-nine.

JR: Okay, until when?

BW: Until he retired and left in '95.

JR: Okay, perfect. I'm going to give you what I consider classic George Mitchell. President Clinton was elected, and not right away, but because of his nature and 'I'm the president and I know you all' and all this stuff, he came to the caucus one day. And Mitchell, very nicely but very firmly said, you are the executive branch, we are the legislative branch, we are now meeting as legislative branch to discuss policies which will at some point intersect with what you're thinking or will not. But this is our time, and I would ask you please not to be here. So the president, whatever his retinue was, the Secret Service and all that, just left. And it was a magnificent moment. I tell that story a lot, because it shows, one, the strength of the Senate, and the power of a firm leader of the Senate. Harry Reid would have done it, Daschle would have done it but would have been a little bit more hesitant to do it, but he would have done it. He would have been more sort of nice about it. Mitchell was just sort of saying, "Okay, we're having our meeting here, we'll be with you when the time is right."

BW: Was that expressed very quietly?

JR: Very quietly, very quietly.

BW: But within your earshot.

JR: Oh yes, oh, no-no, it was done to the caucus. I forget where Clinton would have been, but he wasn't at the front at that point, because that would have meant that he'd arrived and was there, and Mitchell just cut it right off. I just loved it, I just loved it.

BW: Did that color their relationship?

JR: I have no idea. I'm sure it did from the president's point of view for a period of time.

But you know what? It was one of the good things about George Mitchell that wouldn't have bothered him in the slightest. And in fact I think it's true with most majority leaders, one, because when you become a majority leader you are in line and you're top of the Senate, it's a potent position. And so that was a very historic moment. And it was in fact historic, because it was a classic delineation of the Constitutional division of responsibility.

BW: Original intent.

JR: Yes.

BW: Cast your mind back, your first awareness of George Mitchell, had you known him before he came to the Senate?

JR: No, no, all I knew was that he was a Red Sox fan at first, but that was very important to me because I spent probably half my Harvard career at Fenway Park, and the other half I spent at the Boston Garden. And I loved the Red Sox, and I still do, but they're my number two team, not my number one team. But I liked that, because that tells me there's a connection. See, I think baseball, and I've got baseball books and stuff in there, I think baseball plays a very important role, and particularly with a fellow like George Mitchell, who is not necessarily easily approachable. You could approach him on a policy issue but just not human issues: 'hey, how's it going, what's up?' That's not a George Mitchell conversation.

But if you get into baseball, that's a George Mitchell conversation, and it equalizes, it's a gate of entry into an aspect of George Mitchell, which then allows him to have been--- People who really care about baseball and who are, as I would say, master trivia experts, care. That's why Jim Bunning and I, I don't think we've ever cast a vote that's the same, and he's made himself (*unintelligible*), but he's always been a good friend of mine because he loves baseball, and he loves to talk about baseball. And so it's always allowed me to have a very different relationship with him than most of the rest of the Democratic caucus, which is not necessarily kindly disposed towards him. But I like him, and I like his wife, and he's got something like fifty grandchildren, great-grandchildren, et cetera, and he cares about that. I mean, is he a policy devotee? I'm not sure. Probably not. Doesn't matter, he's a person, he's a senator, all senators are different, and he's on the Hall of Fame, he (*unintelligible*). So there are periods during the last couple of years where we talked every single day during a bunch of votes. I'd just walk up to him and then he was immediately receptive, and we'd talk.

Now, that wasn't George Mitchell, I mean you wouldn't discuss baseball with George Mitchell on the floor. I suppose you could have, but they're busy, and they're counting votes and doing things and working on people.

BW: This is a very tangential question, but would there be the baseball senators and then the football senators, and would there be a difference?

JR: I don't think so, no, I mean everybody's a football senator for a while, but it's a much

shorter season and there are not that many teams that are on top and all this, and baseball is just built into the American psyche. And it's also a little bit about, I mean I also love baroque music, and between baroque music and baseball, I have two escapes. They're totally unrelated, obviously, but each fulfilling a need on my part, things that I care to know about, listen to, et cetera.

BW: I imagine the case could be made for there being more connections than you might think, between baroque music and baseball, with the precision and order and so forth.

JR: I would agree with you, but then that would depend where you were in the baroque era.

BW: So when – we got off on an interesting tangent there that I've given a lot of thought to in my own past – were you a Mitchell man when it came to vote for the leadership in '88?

JR: Yes. I don't remember the vote, but there's no question in my mind that's where I was, because I had enormous respect for him.

BW: You came in as a Democratic Leadership Council candidate, would that be fair to say, or not?

JR: I don't even know what that is.

BW: The DLC? I thought you were at the Democratic Leadership meeting in New Orleans when Bill Clinton gave the keynote address? Okay, I must be confused, my apologies. All right, so George Mitchell became majority leader. How would you characterize his leadership?

JR: Firm, undramatic – although there's one side story that was to me untypical of him that I'll tell you about. Businesslike. If you went into his office there wasn't a lot of chitchat, and you invited him, and he had his massive interest in health care just like I do, he was all over the Clinton health care bill just like I was, and so there was always things to talk about with him, but you didn't waste his time. And you were conscious of not wasting his time.

BW: Did he give you signals that was to be the case?

JR: No, it was just his nature, he wouldn't ask you, 'how's your wife doing?' and this or that, or, 'I heard' whatever. Now, we just had a mine disaster in West Virginia, he would have brought that up, but he focused on business. And he was efficient and strong and orderly, and he knew the rules of the Senate, but he didn't know them to the extent that you resented him for it; he didn't overwhelm you with rules and tactics. But that was also a day when you didn't need to; it was a different Senate.

BW: Talk about that a little bit.

JR: Well, it was a more civil Senate and you did much more across party lines, and it wasn't

considered unusual. And the main thing was that, I think that situation would prevail today with excepting about a third of the Republican caucus, who are just purely ideological, they're just purely ideological. But they're run in a really military fashion, it's boot camp all the time, and you do not depart from the leadership. And I'm astounded by that, because you grow to a certain age and you've been a governor or you've been in the House or whatever, and you just understand that people do have gravitas and that they do have feelings. Now, there's some that don't and they probably just go whichever way's the most politically convenient and you would quickly pick those out, but those people don't last in the Senate, or they don't last with respect in the Senate.

But it was a time when people were who they were. Jack Danforth was around, and David Boren, who was a Democrat but often voted Republican was around, but they did what they chose to do. And interestingly – this will get me to my instant – and something which is so opposite from what the Republican Party is today, when they don't even have to do whip counts anymore, because they know that you're going to be with them, McConnell does, or Kyle who are not, to me, impressive personages, but they have that power and so you have to deal with them. Now it's just automatic that you're going to vote with the party.

And Olympia sometimes wanders, but when she didn't wander on the health care debate we all understood that, because I'm sure they said--- I was looking forward to her in one way voting against the health care bill because that means that they wouldn't have removed her from her position where, if Kay Bailey Hutchison had won, or quit the Senate as she at that point was going to do regardless of the outcome of her Texas election, Olympia Snowe would have been ranking to me on the Commerce Committee. And I adore Olympia Snowe, we've done so much together, and I like her as a person and we have very compatible views, and our staffs work well together. But I felt that if she voted for it, obviously I cared more ultimately about the health care bill, but if you're a chairman of a committee, who[ever] is your ranking [member] sets a lot of agendas, or upsets a lot of agendas, too. But she didn't, and that told the story. Because my own view is, and I say this, dear Olympia, if you're ever reading this, with love and respect, abiding, that she had to be for that health care bill, and did too much. People she represents, all those rural folks, people at the end of long country roads, et cetera, they needed that bill so badly.

BW: Was there a down side to George Mitchell's leadership?

JR: No, but I'm taking you to my story. My general answer is maybe that he could have allowed more flowers to bloom, in that there was a sort of a grimness in his leadership. He'd make jokes but the Mitchell smile, it comes and goes quickly, it doesn't tarry. And that's not unkind to him, that's just his nature, he's focused, I mean look at what he came up through, father at that time was still a janitor at Colby College, and the Irish immigrants, the adoptive, I mean everything was just so, so what he came up through. And of course he never talked about that, because he never talks about himself.

But to square against what I've said about the Republicans, as I go back, we have whip counts, I mean the Democrats are, we really do relish policy. And one of the reasons that we're not good

at getting our message out is because we want to get our feelings about a particular policy out, sometimes to the detriment, or more enthusiastically than the party would feel. In other words, the party having a message to which we all strictly adhere is not part of the DNA of the average Democratic senator. And that's again understandable, because you want to win elections and these days, when the media I think has dumbed down America, it's really important to have a message. Because the Republicans, in the various arguments, they repeat exactly the same phrases one after another, with no sense of embarrassment, no sense of shame, no sense of intellectual integrity.

Mitchell was the only majority leader in the twenty-five years that I've been here who ever actually called me at home and asked me to vote a certain way, on the first Gulf War. And I wasn't thrilled about that, see, which is part of what I'm saying. I don't mind being whipped, a whip count, which isn't even done that often, it's done maybe once a month, or maybe they know where I am anyway so they don't come to see me, or maybe I've been around here long enough that they don't do it, I don't know. But then he called me, and I was shaving at home, so I had to put the phone right in the middle of my shaving cream, because I had the razor in the other hand, and so I wasn't happy about that to begin with. But he said, "Now it's really important that you vote against going into the first Gulf War," which I was going to vote against anyway.

So the calling didn't have any effect on me, but it surprised me at the time at least, and in reflection, on a superficial basis, that he would have done that. No other majority leader has ever done that before, to me. They'll say, "We need you on this one, Jay," but that's when you're actually voting. This was a couple of days before, or the day before or whatever, and so I was surprised by that.

BW: I think of all the phone calls that have been archived with LBJ talking to this and that person.

JR: But see, that was a very simpler time. And I get very frustrated by people who say, 'oh, if we could just go back to the days of LBJ and Rayburn'. They ran an efficient operation, but nobody in the House or the Senate participated in it. They just did it on their own, they were board of directors of one and then a couple of friends, and some bourbon, and to me, that has nothing to do with democracy, it has nothing to do with being in the Senate. The reason I love being in this job is that I can have whatever thoughts I have, say whatever I want about any subject at any time, and that's a wonderful feeling of freedom, and I cherish that. I was brought up a Republican, [in] a Republican family, and I switched because of the Kennedy-Nixon election. And I was working for the Peace Corps at that time, and so I watched the debates, and that's where I also got my first view of West Virginia, because there were very few primaries. Humphrey, Kennedy, and West Virginia and Wisconsin were at least two of them, and that was my first real view of West Virginia on television, it was there quite a lot.

But we are who we are, and I'm sure we suffer in the polls somewhat because of that, but life was simpler then. The problems came up one by one, and sort of in an orderly fashion, and we

handled them in an orderly fashion. And now today, everything comes at once and the problems are far worse, and the American people are far more involved, although they may not have done their homework on some of the issues, so they're involved for an ideological purpose, for a political purpose, for a Tea Party purpose, so they're involved. But are they involved? I mean, there's a difference between being a political force, or a political apparent force or a potential force, and between a real discourse or a real argument.

BW: Any observations on George Mitchell's interactions with the two presidents during his time as majority leader?

JR: No, but that goes with any of them, because majority leaders are constantly going off to the White House. Under Clinton, way more than they probably had to, he just liked to do that. They're unbelievably busy, they schedule their floor time for certain things to happen, they have to be there, and then Clinton calls up or whatever and says, "Come on over," and they have to do that. []

(Pause in taping)

[]

BW: Do you think that George, not having any family life to speak of, because he was unmarried during the time he was majority leader, that freed him up to be especially work centric?

JR: I think that most people, as they get more senior in the Senate, or even if they're not, that the Senate is really bad for family life, and there's no way around that, there's no way around that. And now with all the briefing that goes on, I think senators are probably much better briefed today than they used to be. I can't say that for sure, but I know in my own case, I mean obviously when you get more senior you get more people helping, and they're really good. Then you become a committee chairman, then you get just brilliant people over there but it's a very hard life on families. My wife has a full time job, the WTA, but we had four children and I'm sure that they in one way or another have suffered from the fact we both take enormous interest and pride in our professions.

BW: What issues do you associate most with George Mitchell?

JR: Well, health care, and it may stop there because I'd have to go back and look at stuff. Well, the Gulf War. On the other hand, that was over pretty quickly.

BW: Where was he on NAFTA?

JR: My guess, he was probably a no vote, don't you think? From Maine? A lot of textiles up there, probably some shoe manufacturers up there. NAFTA was a really seminal vote because – I was against it, and I predicted, and you see, West Virginia's poor to begin with, but

in every single county, and particularly the poorest counties, which were the rural counties, there was always a textile factory, plant, whatever you want to call it, and a shoe, sneakers usually, plant. Within two years they were all gone after NAFTA passed.

BW: So in hindsight, you have not regretted your vote on NAFTA.

JR: No, no, and I think the whole business of trade equity and fairness in trade, the concept of we're not going to trade with a country that doesn't have the same labor wages that we do, is pretty unrealistic. But I do think if they're selling, as many countries are, through other countries so that the product comes into our country from the third country, but it actually came from the first country, was just sent via the third country so it doesn't constitute an import from that country. But I think manufacturing has suffered. There may be a variety of reasons for that, but one of them is certainly unequal trade, and the vacuous nature of the WTO.

BW: Did you and George Mitchell ever have a discussion about those issues, that you recall?

JR: One didn't have a lot of discussions on issues with George Mitchell unless he wanted to have a discussion on an issue, in which case he'd call some senators into his office. He wasn't a, 'hey, George, what do you think about such-and-such?' on the floor. I'm sure that's not entirely correct, but at least in my experience in the Senate, I don't remember a lot of that kind of thing.

BW: Having just gone through health care in the past few months, you must have been reminded of things recurring that reminded you of '93-4.

JR: Oh yes, yes.

BW: What are your most outstanding memories of that go-round?

JR: Well, they each had their good and bad moments, but final result is that one passed and the other didn't. And there's an irony in that, to me, because if you want to do something, I mean we got ourselves in trouble with the American people, and that doesn't bother me, when the Tea Party people come up to me I just tell them, and they don't bother me, and I just say, "You're going to be so grateful this bill passed, you're just going to forget that you ever belonged to the Tea Party." And I really believe that.

It was a magnificent piece of work, huge piece of work, \$900 billion piece of work. And it took forever, and it updated us on many, many things, will change people's lives, was the largest middle income tax cut ever, I think, and it was wonderful. Now, it was developed in a very untidy fashion, and that's because Obama chose to have it emanate from the legislature. Clinton chose to have his wife, i.e., him, hand it to us. And I can remember – and see, they each had their, one was much more efficient because by having it out there right away, it's automatically out there for people to understand, if they can get at it or care to look at it. But it's out there, so if somebody makes a charge, this is government takeover and all this kind of stuff, we never really could answer that. And we didn't really try to because, frankly, it was so difficult just to

get it done, because we had to get sixty votes. And Teddy lasted just long enough that that could happen. Or did he? Yes, he did, but it was very messy.

So that then took really hard work. It wasn't well done in the Finance Committee, Baucus picked three Democrat conservatives and three Republican conservatives, and somehow had the impression this would get Republican votes and all the rest of us were saying, "There's not going to be a Republican vote no matter what." And by that time, most of us pretty much knew that Olympia wasn't going to be there, because the stakes were too high for her to be there for us alone, it was too high for her. And that gets into her politics, which I don't know enough about, because it doesn't seem consistent with what I think Maine thinks about Olympia, or expects of Olympia, but that's another realm.

But it was messy, and in the process of being messy there was a lot of arguments, and the American people kind of lost interest in the whole thing, which meant that they lost interest in the subject matter, which meant that they went to their worst possible interpretations of what it was we were talking about. And once you arrive at an interpretation which you're comfortable in giving, no matter how specious it might be, and you're comfortable doing it, you stay there, you just stay there, and the facts aren't going to change you.

So that was the downside. Now the upside of it is that we got it passed; that unseemly trading which then got vitiated in the reconciliation process. But that made a big impression on the American people, it really hurt, and didn't increase my respect for some of those senators who were involved. It's just incomprehensible that Ben Nelson could do what he did. How does a United States senator actually *do* something like that? But he did, and there was a reaction against it, but then it passed. And my own view is that over time, and it may not be by this election this year, but over time people will see it for what it is, and that's an enormous improvement. Emergency room care goes way down, they save a thousand dollars plus each year, which they have no idea that they're paying for uncompensated care, but they are. And pre-existing conditions, I mean there's just a wealth of things.

The most remarkable thing about the whole health care bill to me is something which was actually my idea, and that is taking away from the Congress, read "lobbyists," the power to decide how reimbursement is done through Medicaid for doctors, hospitals and medical equipment providers. Because every year, everybody would arrive and they'd say, we don't have enough, we don't have enough, we don't have enough, and I'd give speeches to the American Medical Association, the American Hospital Association, to whoever, a thousand, two thousand people in the audience, and always a discussion: we want to talk about universal health care. And all you had to do was look at about eight faces in front of you, and then more importantly look at the program, and they were there for three days and I was giving one speech, and the Republicans were giving a counter speech, and then they were off to lobby everybody in the Congress to get more.

Nothing to do with health care. And it's the ultimate undermining of, or reinforcing of what should be undone, and that is fee for service. You do the service, send in your bill, we'll pay you

for the service. That's a terrible way of doing business. It should be done on, how good is the service, how necessary was the service, did the person have to go back into the hospital, did the person get sick in the hospital, why did the person get sick in the hospital, were they not cleaning their bathrooms, which is where so much of MRSA comes from, and all of that. And then with doctors and with hospitals, they go through their accreditation and everybody's scrubbing walls in all directions, but is that really what accreditation ought to be about? It ought to really be about analysis of how good that department is, or how good that medical service is. That's not something congressmen, for the most part, have the ability to do. And there are the fourteen thousand lobbyists or whatever it is, what's the figure, six hundred and thirty-five lobbyists for every member of Congress, health care lobbyists, I mean it's just pathetic. And they make a ton of money, and then people go from this body into that profession, make a lot of money, and I don't have much use for that either.

But anyway, that's now gone, it'll all be done by an independent Medicare Advisory Commission, and the Senate can vote it down if it gets sixty percent vote against it, and they won't. And I'm thrilled with that, because that means that we'll get a group of really good public health people who have been through the battles, who know the intimacies of metropolitan statistical areas, i.e.. Wheeling Hospital versus the Pittsburgh hospitals, they're both in the same MSA, very different circumstances. How do you analyze how a doctor is doing? How do you measure outcomes? It's a science that's doable. Dartmouth, a guy named [Dr. John] Wennberg is sort of the god of that school of thought, there are classic analytical ways to measure how medicine is working for people, or not. And you reimburse on that basis.

BW: How closely did the '93-'94 bills get to this kind of situation? Were they just so far ineffectual?

JR: Well, it was for a different reason. Partly it was because, and I was very, very close to the Clintons. I didn't support them in this last election, but I was very close to them, and I was on an inner team. And actually David Broder and Haynes Johnson wrote a book about it, and George Mitchell and Tom Daschle and I, and I think Teddy, every two weeks, one of them would come interview us all through that process. It's worth reading, on Mitchell, just on Mitchell.

BW: Oh, I know it, yes.

JR: And so they, here it is, and that would seem to be good, but in the meantime the American Medical Association was complaining they weren't represented, when in fact they had sixty full-time members on the Clinton task force, the Clintons were not dumb about that, but everybody feels left out. Nobody feels left out if the legislature is doing it, the Congress is doing it, because people can, everybody can feel left out, but nobody can feel, well they're in and I'm not. But they did that, and so people developed hostilities in the formulation of the program, or it became and Ira Magaziner problem, he wasn't really good at dealing with people. And my answer to that is, so what? He was a little short on politics, but he wasn't short on knowledge, but that wasn't everybody's reaction.

And then when they delivered it, they did it too skillfully. They sent Hillary up here, and she was in charge of it anyway, and she was too good. I remember watching her in front of the Senate Finance Committee, she was way too good, she knew too much. In other words, it was like embarrassing to the members, because most of the members didn't know as much as she did, because they hadn't been devoting two years to it, or however long she spent on it, but they prided themselves on caring about health care. And so she had this thing where she would, and every member who'd ask a question she'd say, "Well in Albany you have a rural health care center up there." She was too informed, too ready to answer questions.

So it came as a dicta – is that a word? It was like a papal thing, this is it, this is the plan. And so we weren't really a part of it, and partly it was because the plan was set and we debated over that, and the thing fell apart, nothing came together, but it was partly the way it was presented.

BW: Was there a time when the Republicans could have been won over, or enough of them won over to pass it?

JR: Actually I don't remember, I suspect some of them were, I don't remember that they were uniformly against it. I'm sure as the thing went along they became that way, but I don't know that for sure.

BW: Well, there was the John Chafee mainstream group, Durenberger and that group were trying.

JR: Yes, well I mean that was a good group, that was a good group. I was working with Durenberger on stuff back in the late eighties, and it was a different time then. But still, the way it was presented to us was not, it wasn't buttressing to us, it was kind of ---

BW: Any vivid memories of George Mitchell's playing out the health care -?

JR: I think he was frustrated by that. I can't prove that to you, I don't remember any specific instance, but I do remember some conversations with him in which he expressed frustration. Was it about that? Probably was, it probably was. Don't know that for sure, Brien, but it's my impression that he was frustrated, because it wasn't going anywhere. So, it was an example of two approaches, one which didn't go anywhere at the beginning but ended up squeaking through and the other which, perfectly prepared, but maybe too perfectly prepared, so you take it or leave it type of thing.

BW: When he pulled the plug on it, which I think was in August of '94, I'm not quite sure of the month, several people, and I guess Senator Kennedy was one of them, still felt there was another round to go and you might have done the home run, but did you feel that way?

JR: No, no. Kennedy is made that way, and that's why people love him, one of the reasons. But no, I mean when it failed, it failed. And that's the tragedy, because then you had to wait for

a period of time, and of course that's nonsense that you have to wait twenty years before you can bring it up. Chafee and I did a children's health insurance thing in '96, I guess, that was called "incrementalism," so we all became incrementalists, and that was a trap we put ourselves into, I mean there's no reason why somebody couldn't. But the other thing is, then you were in the Bush era, the Reagan era and the Bush era, and so you weren't going to get any movement on that anyway.

BW: In March '94, George Mitchell announced that he was not going to go for reelection; he was resigning from the Senate. What was your reaction?

JR: Knowing George, it didn't surprise me, because above all he's an independent person. That's what I like about him, I respect about him. He grew up hard, and very, very bright, federal judge, and people have a right to get tired of the Senate. And it's easier for him to get tired of it than it is for me, for example, because he administrates, he administers all the time, he's arranging things. For a while I was on the Democratic Leadership Committee that met every Tuesday or Wednesday at eight o'clock [a.m.], and I remember that's the way I got to see on 9/11, the Pentagon hit, because we were looking out a window and looking directly at it, and they would discuss in what order are we going to bring up, what's the floor strategy going to be, and who's going to do what. It didn't interest me. I'm interested in policy, that's what I love, and I'm not a floor person, I don't spend a lot of time on the floor, I don't give a lot of speeches on the floor. I do my work in committee; I do my work in other ways.

And I think that's a very exhausting job, and thankless job. It's one of these rituals you go through at the Senate where you thank somebody who's just worked for a year and a half, aging ten years to do something which is really important for all of our existence, and then so everybody gives him a hand and then it's over. And I think that being a majority leader can get a bit tiring after a while, so it didn't surprise me. And he always had all these facets to him, there was so much he could do, and did do. And you knew that. You didn't know what he was going to do, but what he did do didn't surprise you.

BW: Did his leaving, or saying 'I'm going to leave', do you think had any negative effect on health care?

JR: I'm sure it did. Nobody's asked me that question. I'm sure it did, because it took a strong voice for health care out. On the other hand, we were in presidential years where that probably wasn't going to happen anyway.

BW: Do you think he suspected or foresaw the '94 Republican revolution on the horizon?

JR: Don't know, I don't know.

BW: Did you?

JR: No, no, and you see, I wasn't that senior, I'd been here only nine years at that point.

He'd been here longer. I don't think a lot escaped George, so my guess is he probably was aware, or saw it happening.

BW: Does it strike you that after he left, was there any George Mitchell legacy left around here?

JR: Yes, really, really high integrity. And I mean *really* high integrity and seriousness, that the Senate is serious work, that public policy is serious work and it's important work, and you're lucky to be here and don't waste your time, and don't waste mine, I mean his. And I think he is remembered for that. He was strong, and you had the feeling, unlike with maybe some others, that he could have any moment chosen not to be majority leader, go off and become a federal judge again, or go on the Supreme Court or become head of a huge law firm and make gazillions of dollars. He always had that possibility because he was so talented and so smart.

My son married Paul Tagliabue's daughter, and for reasons which are not entirely clear to me, they remind me of each other. I don't even know if they know each other. I think they do, because of the sports, he did baseball and Tagliabue was involved in the football part, but I suspect they do know each other. But they both come from the same kind of a background, Paul came from a dock workers family in New Jersey and they worked their way up, they were brilliant, they both loved sports. Paul had the rebounding record at Georgetown University; I think the total is broken by somebody by the name of Patrick Ewing, but pretty impressive stuff. Really, really smart. And they remind me of each other.

BW: So George Mitchell never shared with you maybe his ambition to become commissioner of baseball?

JR: No, no.

BW: Because a lot of people think that he did have his eye on that position.

JR: Well, he may have, and I was offered the job in my last year as governor of West Virginia, I mean offered to the extent that [Leland Stanford] Lee MacPhail, who was Mr. Big at that time, called me up and said, "Instead of running for the Senate, what about coming and doing this job?" Then I was a known baseball lover, but it was a very quick and easy decision for me not to want to do it.

BW: And no second thoughts or second guessing.

JR: No second thoughts whatsoever, not at all. Primarily because, and I've discussed this with Paul, owners of baseball teams are not usually very impressive people, and some are, the Art Rooneys, but you have a lot more – that guy who owns the Yankees, whatever his name is – the Jerry Joneses or the Al Davises, they're just not really impressive people, and in fact disruptive people, and so you're working for them. Who would want to do that?

BW: You came from being governor to being senator. What was that transition like, and what struck you as really unusual or surprising about the Senate, if anything?

JR: Well I've always, I don't know, there was a period several years ago, there were fourteen former governors who were in the Senate, and I was always the only one who much preferred being in the Senate than being a governor, and to me it wasn't even close. And so I'm giving cynical thoughts sometimes about some of the governors because sometimes I'd question, do they really miss their airplanes and their helicopters and their free laundry service and their security details and never having to touch a bag? And for eight years I never touched the wheel of a car, which for me is misery because I love to drive.

To me, a governor's role is a really important role, but it has to do with the location of an industrial park, or the fixing up of potholes, or the worrying about a pension fund for teachers or for state employees, but there isn't the year after year after year focus you can get in the Senate, that's why the six years is so important. And then if you can stay in longer than that, you can pick out fifteen or twenty subjects that you care about, and they depend upon the committees you're on, but I chose well in my committees, Veterans, Intelligence, Commerce and Finance, that's a wonderful cluster of committees, and every one of them holds enormous interest for me. So you can work on something.

There's a piece of legislation in the Commerce Committee which I'm working on right now, which I've been working on for twenty-four years without success because the wrong people were the head of the Commerce Committee. And this is something called captive shippers, and it's very simple. The Congress deregulated the railroads in 1984 or something like that, but at that time they had the Interstate Commerce Commission and every plant, coal mine, granary, oil this, chemical that, had either two lines, in most cases, eighty percent of the time they had two railroad lines service them, so they would compete and therefore the price for carrying your product went down. But, if there was only one under the law the railroad couldn't set the price, the Interstate Commerce Commission or now the Surface Transportation Board had to set the price, that's the law. The law and tradition have just worn that down as railroads have just run roughshod – it's the most powerful lobby in the Congress, much more powerful than the National Rifle Association, for those who deal with those problems. But it meant billions of dollars that were being extracted illegally from companies, because they were always under the radar, they did their work under the radar.

Well that fascinated me, because it was devastating to West Virginia, and so I took that problem up. But the head of the Commerce Committee at that time was all railroad, and most of them have been all railroad, and I'm all shipper, and now the railroads have gotten everything, the shippers have gotten nothing, and so now I've sort of gotten them both in the middle and they both hate the bill, but I think we have a chance of passing it. That's a very boring example, but for me it's not boring because if it takes twenty-four years to get something done, then so be it.

BW: I just have one other question, and that is---

JR: But so anyway, I'm the only one who thinks that way, as far as I know. And that just, it defies logic to me, how somebody could prefer two terms as governor, having to run after one session of the legislature, you're running for reelection, as opposed to this place, which to me is, it's Intelligence, for heaven sakes, Foreign Affairs, it covers everything that goes on.

BW: The subject here has been centered on George Mitchell, but I just wanted you to make a few comments about Ted Kennedy and how important his absence is.

JR: Yes, and I don't know the ways in which Ted and George were close, I can't even prove they were, but I have a feeling they were based upon my intuition, no direct memory, but I can't imagine them not being. Because if anybody would have brought out the humor that George Mitchell had, and he has a prodigious sense of humor, it's just that it's layered, then Teddy could. My guess would have been that Teddy could have gone in and just broken up George Mitchell and reduced him to a human being in no time at all. And George Mitchell would have loved it. Because, I mean Teddy worked hard and George Mitchell knew it, and he knew his stuff, and George Mitchell knew that. George Mitchell liked people who knew their stuff.

BW: Do you miss Kennedy?

JR: Tremendously, yes, oh yes. I care so much, I mean the Kennedys made me a Democrat, because that was my first vote. And I'd been over in Japan, I did three years at a Japanese university and I came back and did my senior year at Harvard, and that was the year of the Kennedy election, and there was just black and white television but I just would get glued to it. And I joined the Peace Corps, I worked for the Peace Corps, I did the Philippines but I wasn't in the Philippines all the time, I was here, back and forth, when Eisenhower was calling the Peace Corps the "Kiddie Corps," because Kennedy was talking about it. It infuriated me, because I was over in Japan really doing that kind of stuff, and I thought it was exactly what America needed. I've always been frustrated by America's lack of interest and knowledge in the rest of the world, and we do nothing about it. Except wars, then we react to that, and it doesn't really make anybody any better.

But I really remember that period very, very strongly. But I couldn't register as a Democrat, and I hadn't even heard of West Virginia, I had never been to West Virginia, I didn't know anything about it. I went to the State Department, after the Peace Corps, because I was all wrapped up in China and Japan, and I wanted to be a Foreign Service officer, I wanted to be the first ambassador to China, and little did I know that the fax machine would take ambassadors and make them sort of appendages, political appointments as opposed to people of real policy. That's too broadly spoken, but not untrue. It was so easy to become a Democrat, and those four years in Washington, the three years of Kennedy, the one year of Johnson, and I was here all those years working for the Peace Corps and for the State Department, were just the most magical years that have ever existed in this country, as far as a young person's concerned.

Which is one of the main reasons I came out for Obama, not just because I believe in him personally but I sensed that he was going to do to American young people, I couldn't prove it,

but I sensed that he was going to do to American young people, to sort of bring new enthusiasm and interest in public affairs and all the rest of it. And the international part, I really, really valued the fact, one, that he had been, as Sarah Palin says, a social worker, because that's exactly what I'd been when I joined VISTA and went to West Virginia, so I kind of think that's a really good thing to do, and I may still be a social worker, I don't think I've really changed; and his foreign experience, and his nature, I think he's terrific.

But the Kennedys, just knowing the Kennedys, I knew them all, I knew all three of them, and they invited me to do things with them, and just being a Democrat. But I couldn't register, because my Uncle Nelson was always running for president, so I couldn't go to White Plains and change to a Democrat, so I just stayed a Republican, voting Democrat until I actually ran for office myself, and then I obviously had to register. But when I did that, I went to see my Uncle Nelson, I made a special trip to New York to see my Uncle Nelson, because he was still governor, and I told him that I was going to run for office as a Democrat. And his eyes got all misty and he said, "I wish I could have done that." See, he didn't get into politics until he was in his forties; I got into it when I was in my twenties, and that was the difference.

BW: That's an incredible story.

JR: Well, it's also one of the reasons that the Rockefeller Republicans became so scarce so quickly. And so I was the only Rockefeller to be a Democrat. Now, all of my generation are Democrats, not because of me, they've just become that way because of what the issues are out there in the world and how they feel about them; so all of Nelson's kids are Democrats.

BW: Well thank you very much for your time, this has been a wonderful recollection of an interesting period of history.

JR: And I don't know George Mitchell as well as I would like to have, and that's probably the way it is, right? I was never going to get to know George Mitchell as well as I would have liked to.

End of Interview